Reflexive Anaphora in VP-Elliptical Sentences of ESL Learners in Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper discusses the interpretation of reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences by L2 learners of English in Cameroon. The interpretation is considered within the Binding Theory of Chomsky (1981) and the Relevance Theory of Sperber and Wilson (1995). In order to investigate this, a grammatical judgment task (GJT) was designed to elicit specific answers. The task which consisted of 14 experimental sentences, with reflexive anaphora in VP-ellipsis in each sentence, was administered to 128 respondents. Each experimental sentence was followed by two alternative interpretations of the VP-ellipsis. Findings reveal that these respondents’ interpretation of reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical structures is characterized by strict and sloppy reading even in referential context favouring strict reading interpretation. The strategies of ‘naïve optimism’, ‘cautious optimism’ and ‘sophisticated understanding’ apparently played significant roles here.

Keywords: Reflexive anaphora, Verb phrase, Ellipsis, Cameroon English, Sloppy reading, Strict reading
Introduction

Reinhart and Reuland (1993) stipulate that reflexives, which are constrained by Binding Theory, are bound to the antecedent in the local clause in which they are found (e.g. Children$_i$ think [that parents$_j$ overwork themselves$_j$]). In this sentence, the bracketed clause is the local clause in which the reflexive themselves and the antecedent NP parents are found. Consequently, themselves is bound by parents, the NP within the minimal binding domain, and not by children, the NP outside the local domain. Thus, the Binding Theory (Chomsky 1981) proposes the conditions under which different nominal expressions establish reference. These conditions are known as the binding principles.

**Principle A**: An anaphor must be bound in its minimal domain;
**Principle B**: A pronoun must be free in its minimal domain;
**Principle C**: A referring expression must be free.

Principle A holds that anaphors (reflexives and reciprocals) are bound within a specific syntactic domain (their governing category). That is, they have an antecedent which c-command them within their governing category (e.g. Paul$_i$ thinks Mabel$_j$ hates herself$_j$). Pronouns (Principle B) are not bound within the governing categories; they can be bound only by elements outside of the governing category (e.g. Jacob$_i$ is a teacher. He$_i$ teaches mathematics). All other NPs (Principle C) are always free (e.g. Jonathan$_i$ is a teacher and Mary$_j$ a medical doctor). Violations of these conditions can be found in the following sentences: *“John$_i$ thinks that Paul$_j$ is buying himself$_i$ a picture” where there is intended co-reference between John and himself. *“He$_i$ thinks that Paul$_i$ is buying John$_i$ a picture”, where there is co-reference between he and Paul.*
As can be seen above, Principle A affects reflexives. A reflexive is a noun phrase which is not interpreted semantically in its own right but which instead makes reference to a determiner phrase (henceforth DP) for its interpretation. The dependency relation of a reflexive to a DP is known as binding and the DP with the fixed meaning is the antecedent that binds the reflexive.

(1) Suzy hurt herself.

In this example *herself* is a reflexive and *Suzy* the DP. Consequently, the reflexive *herself* is a lexical item which has no fixed meaning but instead makes reference to *Suzy* for its interpretation. The dependency relation of the reflexive *herself* to the DP *Suzy* is known as binding and the DP *Suzy* with the fixed meaning is the antecedent that binds the reflexive. In this respect, the proper name *Suzy*, to which the reflexive *herself* points back to, is the antecedent of the reflexive. This shows that the antecedent and the reflexive point to the same entity. This situation whereby the reference expression (reflexive) and the referent (antecedent) point to the same entity is known in the literature as co-reference.

Not every DP is a potential binder of a reflexive. In this connection, Chomsky (1981) stipulates that a reflexive must be bound within its minimal domain; where minimal domain is understood to mean the smallest clause containing the reflexive and its antecedent as in the example below.

(2) Peter[i] told [John[j] to defend *himself*].

In this example, the reflexive *himself* and the antecedent *John* are in the same clause (clause-mate). Consequently, the NP *John* (and not *Peter*) antecedes the reflexive
himself in the above sentence. This is indicated in the above sentence by giving the same index to the antecedent John and the reflexive himself.

Reinhart and Reuland (1993) also underscore the fact that logophoric reflexives (i.e., long-distance bound reflexives or reflexives that are bound to the subject of the higher clause) are not constrained by Binding Theory, but are constrained by pragmatic/discourse factors, and may behave as co-referential anaphora (i.e., like pronouns) as illustrated below.

(3) Alfred thinks he is a great cook, and Felix does [e] too.
   (a) Alfred\textsubscript{x} thinks that X is a great cook, and Felix\textsubscript{y} <thinks that Y is a great cook>.
   (b) Alfred thinks that he is a great cook, and Felix <thinks that he is a great cook>.
   (Goldwater et al 2006:2)

As can be inferred above, (3) is ambiguous between the interpretation in which the elided phrase contains a variable bound by the immediate subject of the elided verb phrase (henceforth VP) (3a) or a pronoun co-referential with the subject of the previous sentence (3b). In this case, the discourse binding constraint states that the antecedent for a reflexive must be a prominent discourse NP. This idea of prominent NP is illustrated in the tree diagram of the following example.

(4) John talked to Paul about himself.
In this tree diagram, *Paul* does not c-command *himself* since the first branching node dominating *Paul* is *P*, which does not dominate the reflexive *himself*. However, the verb *talk*, has three theta-roles (θ-roles) to assign: the talker, the person talked to, and the topic of conversation. Thus, adjoining the second prepositional phrase to *Paul* prevents *talk* from properly assigning the ‘topic of conversation’ θ-role to *about himself* which it should clearly receive. Consequently, assigning this θ-role to *Paul*, enables *himself* to be bound by *Paul*. This is consistent with the approach to binding that takes the antecedent of a reflexive to be the theta-role that satisfies the binding function introduced by the reflexive. Furthermore, the NP *John* c-commands the reflexive *himself* since the first branching node dominating *John* is a minimal inflectional phrase which also dominates the reflexive *himself*. In this way, *himself* is also bound by the subject NP *John.*
Unlike pronouns, Reinhart and Reuland (1993) hold that reflexives are bound to the local antecedent only. This belief is constrained by the Closeness Hierarchy Condition (Pan 1998) which states that the NP closer to the reflexive is the more prominent NP to antecede the reflexive. Consequently, the co-referential reading in which the elided reflexive is co-referential with the subject of the previous sentence is wanting as exemplified by (5b).

(5) Lucie praised herself, and Lili did [e], too.
   a) Lucie$_x$ praised $x$, and Lili$_y$ <praised $y$>.
   b) ?? Lucie$_i$ praised herself$_i$, and Lili <praised herself$_i$>.

(Goldwater et al. 2006:2)

Furthermore, unlike local binding reflexives, logophoric reflexives behave as pronouns. This is as a result of the fact that they can act as locally bound anaphors or co-referential long-distance anaphors as illustrated by (6b).

(6) Lucie liked the picture of herself, and Lili did [e], too.
   a) Lucie$_x$ liked the picture of $x$, and Lili$_y$ <liked the picture of $y$>.
   b) Lucie$_i$ liked the picture of herself$_i$, and Lili <liked the picture of herself$_i$>.

As the ongoing discussion reveals, reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences is interesting in that it allows two possibilities of interpretation (Fiengo and May 1994). This view is explicitly illustrated in (7).

(7) John defended himself and Paul did too.
   a) John$_i$ defended himself$_i$ and Paul$_j$ did [defend himself$_i$] too. (i.e., Paul defended Paul)
   b) John$_i$ defended himself$_i$ and Paul$_j$ did [defend him$_i$] too. (i.e., Paul defended John).

In (7a), the reflexive *himself* in the elided VP co-refers with *Paul*. This interpretation, known in the literature as *sloppy* reading, is set by the requirement of principle A of the
Binding Theory (i.e., an anaphor must be bound in its local domain; where local domain is understood to mean the clause containing the anaphor and its antecedent). In (7b), the pronoun *him* in the elided VP co-refers with *John*, the subject of the higher clause. This interpretation, known as the *strict* reading, is set by principle B of the Binding Theory (i.e., a pronoun must be free in its local domain).

However, the assumption in linguistic literature that reflexives function obligatorily as bound variables (i.e. as reflexives binding to the antecedent NP in the local domain), makes it relatively uncontroversial for them to have a *sloppy* reading. This is evidenced by the fact that reflexive anaphora in English are bound to the closest antecedent as shown in (8).

(8) John, defended himself and Bill, did [defended himself] too.
In this example, *himself* co-refers with *John* while *did too* co-refers with *Bill*. It is in this light that reflexives are said to function obligatorily as bound variables. That is, they are bound to the closest antecedent.

Though this assumption has been unanimously accepted, there has been disagreement, in the literature, on the status of a *strict* reading. Dalrymple et al (1991) proposed that the availability of a *strict* reading of a reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences depends on the semantic property of individual verbs. In this wise, they distinguish between verbs such as *lock* and *depend*, stating that no matter what the structure is, the verb *defend* allows a *strict* reading whereas the verb *lock* does not.
(9) Bill defended himself against the accusation, and John did, too.

(10) John locked himself in the bathroom when bad news arrived, but Bill would never do so.

They explained that *defend* gets both a *sloppy* and *strict* reading because it does not intrinsically impose a requirement of co-reference between its subject and object.

On the other hand, *lock* does not allow a *strict* reading because it imposes a requirement of co-reference between its subject and object. Though this argument is plausible, it is not entertained by Hestvik (1995) who points out that the semantic properties of lexical items do not determine whether reflexives allow a *strict* reading or not. Hestvik compares sentences like (11) and (12) to drive home the argument.

(11) John locked himself in the bathroom when bad news arrived, but Bill would never do so.

(12) John locked himself in the bathroom before Bill could.

As can be inferred above, it is evidently revealed that a *strict* reading is possible in (12), suggesting that an account based on the semantic property of verb is wanting (Hestvik 1995). Furthermore, Kitagawa (1991) approached the problem of *strict* reading of reflexives by reconstructing reflexives as pronouns at the logical form (henceforth LF). She stipulates that a feature [+anaphor] on the reflexive can be suppressed in the copying of the antecedent VP into the elided VP. This is illustrated in (13) where LF of (13a) is (13b) with the reflexive reconstructed as a pronoun.
(13) John likes himself and Bill does too.
   a) John likes himself, and Bill does too.
   b) John likes[+] himself, and Bill[-] him too.

Reconstruction refers to sentences with a reflexive inside a moved NP (14) or sentences with a reflexive inside a moved predicate (15).

(14) John wonders which pictures of himself Bill likes.

(15) How proud of herself does Mary think that Nancy is!

According to Chomsky (1993), reconstruction is relevant to two functions at LF. The first option holds that only wh-elements undergo covert movement to wh-position at LF as demonstrated in (16).

(16) a) John wounded [wh which] Bill saw [wh t pictures of himself].
    b) John wondered [which x [Bill saw [x picture of himself]].

Under this option, himself takes Bill as antecedent by binding Principle A at LF.

The second option assumes that “which pictures of himself” adjoins to “wh” (17a) so that the complementary portions are deleted from the fronted phase and its copy. This yields (17b) and its interpretation in (17c).

(17a) John wondered [wh which picture of himself] Bill saw [wh which picture of himself].
    (b) John wondered [which picture of himself] Bill saw [wh t].
    (c) John wondered [which x, x a picture of himself] Bill saw x].
Under the second option, *himself* takes *John* as antecedent by binding Principle A at LF. The available two options at LF explain why *himself* can seek either *John* or *Bill* as its antecedent.

Fiengo and May (1994) developed Kitagawa’s suggestion and proposed a structural account under the term “vehicle change”. They uphold that the *strict* reading of reflexives involves a change from the reflexive to the pronoun. This comes about as follows: a reflexive, when copied from the first to the second clause, it is allowed to change to pronoun. Thus, “vehicle change” allows *strict* reading by reconstructing the reflexive as pronoun, which, as set by Principle B of the Binding Theory, cannot be locally bound. This explains why the reflexive in the overt VP in (13), repeated here as (18a) can be reconstructed as the pronoun in the elided VP in (18b), referring back to the non-local subject NP *John*.

(18a) John$_i$ likes himself$_i$, and Bill does too.  
(18b) John$_i$ likes$_{[\star \alpha]}$ himself$_i$, and Bill$_{[\alpha]}$ him$_i$ too.

Following the ongoing discussion, we realize that reflexives in the VP-elliptical structures can be interpreted *sloppily* as locally bound anaphora or *strictly* as pronoun. This is in line with the Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) of Sperber and Wilson (1995).

**Relevance Theory**

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 1998, 2002; Wilson & sperber 2002) is an inferential theory of communication, which aims to explain how the hearer infers the communicator’s intended meaning. It holds that human cognition is relevance-based (i.e. we pay attention to information that appears relevant to us, construct relevant representation of such information, and process these
representations in a context that maximizes its relevance). Its principal claim is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise enough, and predictable enough, to guide the hearer towards the communicator’s meaning. In this respect, the Relevance Theory is broadly construed as an inferential approach to pragmatics which is based on a definition of relevance and two principles of relevance - a Cognitive Principle (that human cognition is geared to the maximisation of relevance), and a Communicative Principle (that utterances create expectations of optimal relevance). The goal of inferential pragmatics is to explain how the hearer infers the speaker’s meaning on the basis of the evidence provided.

According to Sperber (1994, 2000), all communicators follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects, but there are varying degrees of expectations of relevance in the course of comprehension. He discusses three sophisticated strategies used for comprehension. The simplest strategy is what he calls naïve optimism (Sperber 1994:189). A hearer using this strategy looks for an interpretation that appears to be relevant enough. If the hearer finds one, he assumes that it was the intended interpretation and attributes it to the communicator’s meaning. A second strategy, a more complex one, is what he calls cautious optimism (Sperber 1994:191). A hearer using this strategy takes the first interpretation as relevant enough and attributes it to the communicator’s meaning. Besides, the hearer also considers what interpretation the communicator “might have thought” would be relevant enough (Wilson 2000). A third strategy is what he calls sophisticated understanding (Sperber 1994:194). A hearer using this strategy considers what interpretation the communicator “might have thought he would think” was relevant enough.
Relevance, therefore, is treated as a property of inputs to cognitive processes and analysed in terms of the notions of contextual effect and processing effort. On the contextual effect factor, the communicator guarantees that the prepositions conveyed will be optimally relevant to the hearer and that this relevant information will yield adequate contextual effects to justify the hearer’s attention. Therefore, contextual effect is achieved when newly presented information interacts with the context of existing assumption in one of the three ways: by strengthening an existing assumption, by contradicting an existing assumption or by combining with an existing assumption to yield a contextual implication or a logical implication. It is healthy to point out here that the contextual implication or a logical implication is derived neither from the new information alone, nor from the context alone, but from the combination of the new information and the context. On the processing effect factor, the communicator, who wants to achieve adequate contextual effect, makes sure that the utterance requires no more than the hearer’s minimum justifiable processing effort. This is as a result of the fact that “any increase in unjustifiable processing effort of the hearer is an increase in the risk of misunderstanding” and “might cause the overall relevance of the utterance to fall below the acceptable level” (Wilson and Sperber 1991:588). Thus, to Sperber and Wilson, communication has to do with the hearer’s inference of the communicator’s intention.

In relevance-theoretic terms, utterances raise expectations of relevance because the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition. In this respect, an utterance is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him: say, by answering a question he had in mind, improving his knowledge on a certain topic, settling a doubt, confirming a suspicion, or
correcting a mistaken impression (Wilson and Sperber 2002). Hence, an input is relevant to an individual when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect (Sperber & Wilson 1995). The notion of a ‘positive cognitive effect’ is needed to distinguish between information that merely seems to the individual to be relevant and information that actually is relevant. An efficient cognitive system is one which tends to pick out genuinely relevant inputs; yielding genuinely true conclusions (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

The most important type of cognitive effect achieved by processing an input in a context is a contextual implication; a conclusion deducible from the input and the context together, but from neither input nor context alone. Relevance theory therefore claims that what makes an input worth picking out from the mass of competing stimuli is not just that it is relevant, but that it is more relevant than any alternative input available to us at that time (Wilson & Sperber 2002). The relevance of an input to an individual depends on the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing the input. For instance, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. On the other hand, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. The following illustration, drawn from Wilson & Sperber (2002), illustratively explains these concepts. Mary, who dislikes most meat and is allergic to chicken, rings her dinner party host to find out what is on the menu. He could truly tell her any of three things:

(a) We are serving meat.
(b) We are serving chicken.
(c) Either we are serving chicken or (72 – 3) is not 46.
According to the characterisation of relevance, all three utterances would be relevant to Mary, but (b) would be more relevant than either (a) or (c). It would be more relevant than (a) for reasons of cognitive effect: (b) entails (a), and therefore yields all the conclusions derivable from (a), and more besides. It would be more relevant than (c) for reasons of processing effort: although (b) and (c) are logically equivalent, and therefore yield exactly the same cognitive effects, these effects are easier to derive from (b) than from (c), which requires an additional effort of parsing and inference (in order to work out that the second disjunct is false and the first is therefore true). Thus, (b) would be the most relevant utterance to Mary, for reasons of both effort and effect.

As the foregoing discussion reveals, the Binding and the Relevance theoretical frameworks are used for this study to find out whether the interpretation of reflexives in verb phrase elliptical sentences, by L2 learners of English in Cameroon, is constrained by the minimal processing effort or the syntactic order and the contextual effects.

Data and Methodology

The respondents for this study are 128 L2 learners of English in Cameroon. The target population is made up of university students, who are enrolled in the Department of English of the University of Yaounde I, at different proficiency levels (Level One (40), Level Two (45), and Level Three (43)). These students come from different ethnic background; thus, they speak different indigenous languages and at least a lingua franca. They are chosen because they have been exposed to English for at least fourteen years (i.e. seven years in primary school and seven years in secondary/high school). A production test was deployed to test the subjects’ interpretation of reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical structures. The test had fourteen
test items and twenty-eight distracters. Six of the fourteen experimental sentences were followed by a referential context favouring strict interpretation as in (2) below. The other eight sentences were in a null context. Each sentence was followed by two alternative interpretations (i) and (ii) (see samples below). The subjects were asked to check which version matches their understanding of the underlined part of the sentence. The following are samples of the experimental sentences used in eliciting the subjects’ interpretation of reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical structures:

(1) Paul defended himself well and John did it too. What does the underlined part of the sentence mean?
i) ______ John defended John.
ii) ______ John defended Paul

(2) Yvonne defended herself and Cynthia did too. Cynthia was a good friend of Yvonne. What does the underlined part of the sentence mean?
i) ______ Cynthia defended Cynthia
ii) ______ Cynthia defended Yvonne

(3) Mabel talked about herself and Deborah did too. What does the underlined part of the sentence mean?
i) ______ Deborah talked about Deborah.
ii) ______ Deborah talked about Mabel.

(4) Max criticized himself and Jonathan did too. Jonathan did not like Max. What does the underlined part of the sentence mean?
i) ______ Jonathan criticized Jonathan.
ii) ______ Jonathan criticized Max.

(5) Lucy praised herself and Jane did it too. What does the underlined part of the sentence mean?
i) ______ Jane praised Jane.
ii) ______ Jane praised Lucy.
Analysis and Results

This section probes into the responses provided by the respondents in the data. It establishes the frequency of occurrence of both strict and sloppy readings. This is done to evaluate the extent to which the respondents adhere to the binding principles in VP-elliptical structures.

Interpretation of reflexives in the referential context favouring strict reading

Subjects were expected to have a strict reading of reflexive anaphora in VP-ellipsis in a referential context favouring strict reading. In considering sentences like [Yvonne defended herself and Cynthia did too. Cynthia was a good friend of Yvonne], the results in table 1 are recorded.

Table 1: Interpretation of reflexive anaphora in the referential context favouring strict reading (n=6)

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Level ONE</th>
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<th>Level Three</th>
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<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sloppy reading</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>21.67%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>13.70%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>08.14%</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>14.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict reading</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>78.33%</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>86.30%</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>91.36%</td>
<td>658</td>
<td>85.68%</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</table>

The table above shows that the subjects provided 110 (14.32%) responses in which they interpreted the reflexive anaphora, in VP-elliptical sentences favouring strict reading, sloppily; and 658 (85.68%) responses in which they gave a strict reading as seen in example (19) below. This gives a difference of 548 (71.35%) more strict reading.

19) Yvonne defended herself and Cynthia did too. Cynthia was a good friend of Yvonne.
What does the underlined part of the sentence mean?

i) ____x____ Cynthia defended Cynthia. = (sloppy reading)

ii) ___x___ Cynthia defended Yvonne. = (strict reading)
The above statistics show that the respondents interpret reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences, in referential context favouring strict reading, both sloppily and strictly. The results are presented on a mean percentage graph below. It records the mean percentage of sloppy and strict readings the respondents of each level of proficiency provided in the interpretation of reflexive in VP-elliptical structures.

Graph 1: Mean % graph of sloppy and strict readings in the referential context favouring strict reading

As can be inferred in the graph above, sloppy reading diminishes as the subjects move up the academic ladder: Level One respondents scored (21.67%), Level Two respondents (13.70%) and Level Three respondents (08.14%). In the same vein, strict reading progresses gradually as the subjects move up the academic ladder: Level One (78.33%), Level Two (86.30%) and Level Three (91.86%).

**Interpretation of reflexives in the null context**

It was expected here that subjects will go by Principle A of the Binding Theory, which affects anaphors, to give a sloppy reading of the reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical structures. In considering sentences like [Paul defended himself well and John did it too]; [Mabel talked about herself and Deborah did too], the results in table 2 were recorded.
Table 2: Interpretation of reflexive anaphora in the null context (n=8)

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<th></th>
<th>Level One</th>
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<td>Score</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sloppy reading</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>53.12%</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>62.50%</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>68.60%</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>61.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict reading</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>46.88%</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>31.40%</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>38.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

As can be seen in the table, it turned out that the subjects provided 631 (61.62%) responses in which they interpreted the reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences *sloppily*; and 393 (38.38%) responses in which they gave a *strict* reading as seen in the example below.

20) Paul defended himself well and John did it too.
What does the underlined part of the sentence mean?
i) _____x__ John defended John. = (sloppy reading)
ii) ____x___ John defended Paul. = (strict reading)

The above statistics show that the subjects prefer more a *sloppy* reading of the reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences, in the null context, to a *strict* reading. The results are presented on a mean percentage graph below. It records the mean percentage of *sloppy* and *strict* readings the subjects provided in the interpretation of reflexive in VP-elliptical structures.

Graph 2: Mean % graph of *sloppy* and *strict* readings in the null context
As can be inferred in the graph above, sloppy reading progresses gradually as the subjects move up the academic ladder: Level One (53.12%), Level Two (62.50%) and Level Three (68.60%). In the same vein, strict reading diminishes as the subjects move up the academic ladder: Level One (46.88%), Level Two (37.50%) and Level Three (31.40%). These results show that the minimal processing effort of the Relevance Theory (RT) constrained these learners’ interpretation of reflexives in the VP-elliptical constructions. The respondents chose the most accessible sloppy reading because it involves the least effort in computing cognitive effects. Seeking the lower subject to be the antecedent for the reflexive was easier than seeking the higher subject because the distance between the reflexives and the lower antecedent is shorter than the distance between the reflexive and the higher subject. Furthermore, the binding relationship between the reflexive and the lower subject is within a single binding node as demonstrated by the example below. The sentence “John defended himself and Bill did too” has two binding nodes: 

\[
\text{[IP John defended himself [conj and [IP Bill did too]]]}
\]

In contrast to the sloppy reading, the strict reading is costly on the grounds that the pronoun reading, which involves a change to the pronoun from the reflexive, is not available in the linguistic information of the sentences. Secondly, the distance between the reflexive and its higher antecedent is greater than the distance between the reflexive and its lower antecedent. Thirdly, the binding relationship of the reflexive in the elided VP with its higher subject is not within the single binding domain. Thus, constrained by the least processing effort of RT, the L2 learners of English in Cameroon, forged ahead with the most accessible sloppy interpretation as evidenced by the high percentage of sloppy reading.
Furthermore, the results show that the interpretation of reflexives in a null context, show that the minimal processing effort of Relevance Theory constrained the respondents’ interpretation of reflexives in the VP-elliptical structures. This is evidenced by the high percentage sloppy interpretation by all the proficiency levels: 53.12% for the Level One, 62.50% for Level Two, and 68.60% for Level Three. In all, the respondents scored 61.62% sloppy reading as against 38.38% strict reading.

In the interpretation of reflexives in the referential context favouring strict reading, it is realized that the syntactic order and contextual effects of Relevance Theory constrained the respondents’ interpretation of reflexives in VP-elliptical sentences. This argument is supported by the high percentage of strict reading of the reflexives in VP-elliptical constructions favouring strict reading, in all the proficiency levels: 78.33% for Level One, 86.30% for Level Two, and 91.86% for Level Three. When the scores are tallied, we notice that respondents scored 85.68% strict reading as against 14.32% sloppy reading. Though the contextual effects of Relevance Theory constrained the respondents’ interpretation of reflexives in VP-elliptical structures favouring strict reading, the respondents do not reject sloppy reading out rightly in favour of strict reading alone.

In all, both the sloppy and strict readings are adopted by the respondents even in referential context favouring strict reading. They interpreted the reflexives sloppily using the strategy of naïve optimism which is constraint by the least processing effort of Relevance Theory. In this regard, we noticed that the respondents looked for the interpretations that appeared to be relevant enough to them at that time and assumed that they were the intended interpretations. As such, they attributed these interpretations to the communicator’s meaning. They were
also adept in using the strategies of cautious optimism and sophisticated understanding which resulted in strict interpretation of reflexives. With regard to this, we could say that the respondents looked for the interpretation that appeared relevant to them in relation to context (contextual effect), what the communicator might have thought would be relevant to them, and what the communicator might have thought they would think was relevant enough.

Finally, none of the respondents adopted a purely sloppy or a purely strict reading of the reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical structure, although they were unanimous in either a strict reading or a sloppy reading of a few structures. The foregoing interpretation could be considered peculiar in Cameroon English because of the influence of the respondents’ first language (L1). Reflexive anaphora in the various indigenous languages (first language (L1) of each of the subjects) violate binding Principle A in both sides since a reflexive anaphora in these languages can be bound outside its local domain on the one hand and may be bound within its local domain on the other hand. This is as a result of the fact that the L1 of each of these respondents has both a complex reflexive and a simplex reflexive. For instance, there is a complex reflexive yi nyor (hisself) in Limbum (one of the indigenous languages spoken in the North West Region of Cameroon and by some of the respondents) and echi-nyu (hisself) in Akɔɔse (one of the indigenous languages spoken in the South West Region of Cameroon and by some of the respondents) which binds long-distance (i.e. to the subject of the higher clause) and a simplex reflexive (e.g. nyor (self) in Limbum and nyu (self) in Akɔɔse) which binds only locally. As a consequence of this, it would not be erroneous to say that the phenomenon of language transfer and/or influence may have played a significant role here. However, findings reveal that education affects the attainment levels in the interpretation
of reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical constructions. There is a significant correlation between the level of education and the patterns of interpretation as far as the respondents are concerned.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the interpretation of reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences in Cameroon English. The results indicate that both the principles of minimal processing effort and the syntactic order and contextual effects of the Relevance Theory, constrain L2 learners of English in Cameroon in the interpretation of reflexive anaphora in VP-elliptical sentences. Hence, they plow ahead with both a sloppy and a strict reading of these reflexives in the null context and in the referential context favouring strict reading.

References


